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Joseph Auslander

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# LETTERS TO WOMEN







# LETTERS TO WOMEN

BY

JOSEPH AUSLANDER

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LETTERS TO WOMEN

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DEDICATION

To all women for the sake of one woman

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## A P O L O G Y

I HAVE written these *Letters to Dead Ladies* because in these women, singly and severally, I found certain qualities of mind and heart, outside the fascination of their personalities, which we are in desperate need of today. I have chosen dead ladies with something like malice prepense, being assured that they had lived and were done with living;—and, by that token, aware of their intense timelessness—having free access to their wisdoms and their follies; knowing that I should not trespass upon the sacred precincts of the soul. Furthermore, it was so much safer than writing letters to ladies alive (and, if anything, less contemporaneous), with husbands in the offing somewhere.

Here, at least, I could let go. I could tell certain illustrious ladies what I had always wanted to tell them, and what, had I known them in the flesh, I should probably never have hoped or dared to tell them. Being dead, they were no longer possessive or possessed. I was at liberty to speak out. I could talk tenderly and proudly to Sappho. I could feel with Lot's wife, understanding the salty necessity of her decision. I could have it out with Fanny Brawne. I could hold vivid converse, in the Northwest Passage of that old house at Amherst, with the mischievous and dazzling imp, Emily Dickinson—asking her questions this time! I could tell that lovely little child-wife of Edgar Poe what nobody has ever thought of telling her. I could, in some measure, repay La Duse for a certain moment without which I should have walked the poorer in spirit these many years. I could have one more robustious resounding talk with Amy Lowell—and how she could talk! I could cry *Salve atque vale* to Elinor Wylie, glittering ambiguously still, revealed in defiant flashes, riding the fox and hunting the unicorn and wearing always on her spacious forehead the sardonic and lonely stigmata.

*But aside from this desire for personal satisfaction, I felt cued to these letters by a deeper wish and a darker intention. In a word, I really wanted to write to every woman, to woman as woman in a society directed and dominated by women. Standing squarely in the moral tradition of English poetry, I determined to hail the living by saluting the dead; and, which is most important, to discuss with my dead ladies, as of today, certain problems in ethics upon the honest solution of which, it would appear, our entire civilization pivots. Women have always been more audacious in conduct and more conservative in principle than men. By birthright and by custom, that is their paradoxical privilege. They are the moral barometers of an age. Men are blustering little cowards who never grow up. Perhaps Oscar Wilde was in the right when he said, "The history of woman is the history of the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known—the tyranny of the weak over the strong. It is the only tyranny that lasts."*

*At any rate, I have written these letters, such as they are, to women. And if a living woman is a tyrant, a dead woman is a despot. For the dead ride harder than ever—none harder, indeed, than these eight, hand-picked from a brilliant procession, because, taken together, they defined, for me, the full and various woman. The letter form moved admirably to my purpose. By its very nature, it admitted ease and fluency of address; it established at once a level of intercourse which could be friendly without offense and intimate without confusion. It bristled, too, with possibilities of novelty and freshness. Moreover, it is woman's peculiar invention and delight.*

*Tyrants, the slave is finished!*

JOSEPH AUSLANDER

NEW YORK CITY

9 May 1929

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P R E F A T O R Y E P I S T L E

**D**EAR LADIES, dead and most unconquerable,  
Most curiously alive beneath theilles,  
Still is our little buzz of heaven and hell,  
And still is  
The fruit to Paris, the frenzy to Achilles.

We have not pushed a millimeter beyond  
The Wooden Horse, the clash of steel on bone;  
Though Helen is less private and more blond,  
Men groan  
For her, and grunts for Circe, and eat bone.

Men wive and wench at always, being men;  
As always, women feed with lips unfed  
Their cruel hungers; always Magdalen  
For bread  
Breaks her dark breath upon a sleepless bed.

Shall I exclaim with Browning, "Here they are,  
My fifty men and women!"? . . . One and seven—  
And women only, sharp and singular,  
Driven  
One way or another, toward the same hard heaven.

Of none of any of these can it be told  
That she was flat or feeble; even she  
Who died so young, being in pain so old,  
Could be  
More than a pale melodist: Annabel Lee.

And one there was, high-nostrilled fiery one,  
Who rather than endure against her lips  
An old man's mouth or feel an old man run  
His fingertips  
Over her brow and breasts, burned like a nun

With other nuns in strange forbidden blisses,  
Knowing the quick and harsh satieties  
Of men; and there was one who drank fierce kisses  
That freeze  
The heart and heart's blood, binding hands and knees

With ice; and one there was, for good or ill,  
Who by her beauty set a seal upon  
High song's most brief and bitter codicil—  
The one  
Who breathed a death into Endymion.

And that austere and lavish lady whose  
Haggard latin eyes held all despairs,  
All fugitive exultations; who renews  
And tears  
Dead hearts with dreams half hers and wholly theirs.

And that naïve New England sprite, more gnome  
Than nun; that tiny imp in church who—sneezed!  
With Joan and with Jezebel at home:  
Who teased  
The Lord with questions—and went unappeased.

The most embarrassing and peculiar elf  
That ever ran along a blood-streaked road  
Crying shrill riddles—answering them herself.  
She showed  
Jehovah how to solve the Sphinx in code

That must be read by lightning; and that lonely  
Lady of fire and crystal who was born  
To suffer passion phoenix-like and only  
In scorn  
Of her own furious blood, with jewelled horn

And silver hounds and narrow golden does,  
A new Diana pricked out cap-a-pie,  
In armour of proud glass, with a glass rose,  
Swept by,  
Plume flashing—and heart beating foolishly.

And that prodigious advocate, with vision  
And voice to roar it down the world, who stood  
Against the apathy and faint derision,  
The feud  
Between her purpose and her private blood,

And, tortured in the flesh and mortified  
In the sick solitary heart, became  
A strength that swung a sword from side to side,  
A name  
Like a shout at night, like a flame lost in flame!

Tennyson had his gallery of women  
More or less “fair”; well, here you are, my ladies,  
All sisters and all Puritans—quite human—  
Whose trade is  
Being remembered, though it were in Hades.

Being too vivid, too alive, too much  
A part of beauty and our common pain,  
Too near to lose and too remote to touch:  
The stain  
Of moonlight on the hand, the sound of rain.

If, therefore, various ladies, in this book,  
(Which is a dial’s shadow to record  
The golden accidents of light) this look,  
That word,  
Twisted by time, more overheard than heard,

Should stick too fiery off; or if, in heat,  
Our modern breed of harpies, that would rend  
Even the Lord’s Last Supper, smell this meat  
And bend  
Their beaks and talons to a certain end—

Nevertheless, I do entreat your laughter,  
The ghostly laughter of a ghostly clan:  
Brave ladies lived before Freud and will after;  
Nor can  
Hooks shift the status of Leviathan.

## LETTER TO ELINOR WYLIE

*Beauty's pure pathetic shape;  
The trap I never shall escape;  
The heavenly bait; the honey breath  
Issuing from the jaws of death. . . .*

—ELINOR WYLIE

*Chimaera Sleeping*





## LETTER TO *Elinor Wylie*

*But in her web she still delights  
To weave the mirror's magic sights,  
For often through the silent nights  
A funeral, with plumes and lights,  
And music, went to Camelot:  
Or when the moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers, lately wed;  
"I am half-sick of shadows," said  
The Lady of Shalott.*

**I** WILL not burden you with pleasant words,  
That being neither here nor there with these  
Volleys of major sevenths and minor thirds,  
The gaudy salvos, the loud eulogies.

Loving your silence, I will not intrude;  
Feeling your jewelled scorn, I will not praise:  
Shall I dispute the eagle's solitude?  
Or bell the fox? Or hood the falcon's gaze?

Let me not join the general shout, the sounds  
Of the strident pack that loves the noise it makes—  
You turn Actaeon to your own swift hounds;  
You twist Laocoön to your own snakes.

You were a sort of golden Puritan,  
And, by your own confession, loathed the riches  
That swarm the languid valleys: so you ran  
With antelopes upon precarious niches,

Pasturing a hard frozen salt that burned  
And glittered on the tongue; the taste of ledges  
Tingled; the palate of your soul discerned  
Amid a muddled world the gleam of edges.

The casual and clumsy bastinado  
Of time and circumstance upon the mind  
Found you entrenched in beauty and bravado,  
Fiery as frost, as fire and ice defined.

What did we know who looked upon your pallor?  
What could we guess who saw your level eyes?  
Under the brown poised wings of hair what valour  
That is most frightened when it most defies?

As in the flesh of Tyrian stuff the streak  
Of thread stitched in like blood; the purple vein  
Gasping through anguished marble; the proud beak  
Honed on its own breast—such was your disdain.

And such the scrupulous passion, the astute  
Tyranny of perfection, that the word  
Hung like some perilous and silver fruit,  
Swung from the hair of gold a flashing sword.

For you had stared upon that Face whose flame  
Dazzles the eyeball dark; and in your heart  
You knew that nothing could be quite the same  
Again save in the livid truth of art.

There was the rampart! There the bright escape!  
There the brief mercy that is merciless!  
There with cold wings the high and shadowy shape  
Imprisoning the fugitive they bless!

O restless heart! O deft and ravenous brain  
Whose diamond arithmetic devoured  
Confusion—only to be lost again  
After the stringent epithet had flowered!

Did the sharp mischief of the mind demand  
The heart's submission? Was the woman broken  
To the brain's brilliant whip, the brittle hand,  
The crystal phrase that splinters being spoken?

Was love too much of chaos?—the hot senses,  
The breath disturbed, the blood's rebellion shaking  
Your delicate Eden with its recompenses?  
The glass bird trembling? The glass blossoms breaking?

If love prevail, how should the mind maintain  
Her fierce fastidious empire? Dispossessed  
Of love, how should the banners of the brain  
Stretch upon what wind, stream upon what crest?

O Blake in chain mail, and both Emilies,  
And brightly bitterly yourself withal,  
The silver and unwithered lilies freeze;  
The song suspended, the leaf cannot fall!

*She left the web, she left the loom,  
She made three paces thro' the room,  
She saw the water-lily bloom,  
She saw the helmet and the plume,  
She look'd down to Camelot.  
Out flew the web and floated wide;  
The mirror crack'd from side to side;  
"The curse is come upon me," cried  
The Lady of Shalott.*

## LETTER TO AMY LOWELL

*Suddenly I am lonely:*

*Where are you? . . .*

*Madonna of the Evening Flowers*





### LETTER TO *Amy Lowell*

AMY LOWELL, of Brookline, Massachusetts,  
One of the Lowells that would talk with God,  
And with God only, what is all this chatter  
Of the proud little girl, the Puritan  
Bookish and pampered, who would be a poet  
In spite of flesh, conventions, dollars, even  
In spite of being a Lowell of the Lowells?  
What is this blab of giving plays in Boston  
On Sunday afternoons! Nay, if you please,  
Domiciling actresses and such  
At *Sevenels* beneath ancestral noses!  
Forcing "free verse" on *The Atlantic Monthly*!  
And with barbed prefaces and black cigars  
And such robustious periwig-pated thunder  
As Luther's ink-well spattered on the Devil

Hammering at the fortresses of Boston  
Your gusty purpose, serving Whigs and Tories  
Alike with notice of a new Tea Party  
Minus the tea, but fragrant with cigars  
And ultimatums!

O erratic scandal  
Clacking over the cups of Beacon Hill!—  
And have you heard! . . . Buzz, buzz! . . . And have  
you seen! . . .  
Buzz, buzz! . . . And do you know she . . . this! . . . and  
that! . . .  
And the proud vestibule and drawing room  
Is now become nocturnally a shambles  
With shibboleths in various agonies  
Expiring under furniture everywhere!  
And buzz, buzz! . . . Is it possible? . . . So-and-so  
Told me this morning over the telephone  
That her maid told her she was told last night  
By a cousin of her—Miss Lowell's—chambermaid  
That she—Miss Lowell, I mean—affects a sort  
Of sacred pent house under the roof where she  
Swarms in pontifical dimensions, fussing  
With secretaries, sheep-dogs and kimonos,  
Typewriters going like mad and maids pell-mell,  
And visitors and breakfasts, lunches, fires,  
Electric fans and bandages and bundles  
Of manuscripts, and pencils sharp as needles  
And blunt long black cigars! Would you believe it,

My dear? . . . Incredible! . . . Now whisper "Bed-room!"

And hear her gasp, O Snapper-Up of Trifles!  
The bedroom tuned to levees and redundant,  
Like all the house from cellar up to attic,  
With books and books and books and—say it—bed!  
Ah, there's a morsel she will choke on rather  
Than lose the relish of it in a gulp!  
For this, O Harpies and Professional Hounds  
Of Heaven, I would have you understand  
This is no ordinary bed, is this,  
But something in its way not quite unworthy  
The ingenuity of King Procrustes,  
Though hardly so promiscuous, that is;  
And not susceptible to alteration  
In size or occupant; and, as for comfort,  
The numerous pillows and the much adored  
And equally besbrewed and faithful helot  
Who smacked the pillows for her whimsical mistress  
Gave sturdy warrant as to that, I warn you;  
The Genius of this castle, like the waif  
Who proved true princess in the fairy tale,  
Would just as soon detect the pea that pinched  
Though it were smothered under twenty pillows.

What matters eight o'clock or nine o'clock  
Of a summer's evening to our noble lady?  
Let come the dinner guests. Let *them* be prompt!  
The crimson car of privilege swings in, purring;

The yellow lights like cat's eyes rock across  
The dark green hedges; scissored evergreens  
Sparkle their cones like cressets to renew  
The fireflies that fill the sunken garden  
With fugitive golden lamps; the bougainvillea,  
Spattering purple stars along the terrace,  
Glitters in silver point beneath the lights  
Spraying like fountains . . . while a minor poet,  
Some timid bardling with "Harvard" on his forehead,  
Even your servant, Milady, (in more senses  
Than he knows now) is being slowly nibbled,  
Not without some contempt, by seven sheep-dogs,  
Dynastic darlings fresh from lording it  
Over their abject slave, yourself, Milady;  
Fresh from the seven deep punctilious basins  
Of food to which this pallid bardling offers  
But desperate dessert, such as it is,  
Till, by the celtic intervention of  
Timothy and the tinkling silver bell,  
The bardling, through the rich manorial gloom,  
Limbs in with one iambic foot—and the time—  
Considerably out of joint to find  
Floors of traditional glass, extravagant vistas  
And that voluptuous Victorian table  
Where sits the black and silver adjutant  
Of our most absent imperturbable Diva,  
Dispensing courtesy and lichee nuts  
And candied pear, the while our tyrant dallies  
Sans diamonds and beryls, unabashed,

A little girl, her brown hair looped up—so—  
(All this between the filet and the roast  
From the silver adjutant) her flowered robe,  
As virginal as her mood, swishing along  
Blue lupin walls with a sweet thready whisper,  
Against the pallor of the Japanese prints  
Plum blue, but much less blue and not more mild  
Than the novitiate's vapour-softened eyes.  
For she has elvish intervals, though her bath,  
Enormous bath-room and the flash and crackle  
Of orders, taunts, intransigent entreaties,  
(All saved somehow from grimness by a warm  
And buoyant boisterousness) though these are part  
Of equipage and incantation vital  
To her whose person and whose verse insist  
Upon applause, affection, anything  
But dullness or indifference or neglect.

Ah there, my Prima Donna of the poets,  
There is the secret of your entourage,  
Your adoration of La Duse, your  
Jealous delight in your dark silver friend,  
Both actresses, and you no less an actress,  
Even in your hieratic opulence  
And those luxurios insulations from  
The world you scorned and slapped and ridiculed  
And coaxed and cozened and compelled to listen  
(And feared, in ambush, with a naked heart  
On fire); there is the secret that consumed

Fiercely within, gnawing with sullen teeth  
And driving you in a desperate regimen  
Self-trapped, in frenzied circles, self-destroyed.  
It is your terrible loneliness, terrible  
Always, but here most bitter, Amy Lowell.  
From the first cruel awareness of the gap  
Between the flesh and exquisite victories;  
The first hot anguish and resentment forced  
Back and in upon itself to smoulder  
Proudly and privately; the natural hopes  
Of love banked up and checked; the natural gifts  
Of mind pressed into dazzling double service;  
The masculine assumptions; barricades  
Of bone in conflict with lace net and satin;  
Books against flowers; belligerent manifestos  
Against the autocratic wistfulness;  
Staccato tones, erecting silver lances  
Against the intimate stillness, dark and lonely,  
Throbbing under the heart of every woman—  
And under your heart cheated and choked down  
With something savage in its emphasis  
Upon the mental music.

I have seen  
Your mouth and cyclids tremble, and have felt  
Some swift affectionate anguish moving there  
Like a sudden gust that flattens, driven back  
Darkening; in your eyes that snapped and sparkled  
Like bright blue stones in sunlight I have watched

A shadow black and brief as wind or cloud  
Strike through and vanish leaving, as storm leaves,  
Unnatural vehement lustre and the sense  
Of sad implicit paradises lost  
Forever.

But to all the world you turned  
The vivid polka-dotted mask, the tricks  
And trappings of a legend which they loved  
Because it shocked them or perplexed or passed  
For triumph of a sort they understood  
Without approving of it and indeed  
Without in the least knowing why. You forced  
A heavy comfort-sodden age where wealth,  
Social prestige and indolence strangely mixed  
With skyscrapers and energies and wants  
Known but unnamed, denied, despised, rejected—  
You forced that age to pay for poetry,  
To buy it and to read it. You, St. Paul  
To the Corinthians, cracking acrid whips  
Over their heads and whistling them to heel.

What else were all the circus pranks about?  
The side-shows and the ballyhoo? What else  
This business of appearing at the Symphony—  
The Sacred Boston Symphony—with a friend  
A footstool and a front row all together?  
That famous extra-watt lamp at your lectures;  
That quarterly Assyrian descent

Upon the Hotel Belmont, terrifying  
The humdrum hostelry to a wondrous fever  
Of preparation for the potentate.  
From cellars and from furnaces the swarthy  
Familiars popped, the subterranean forces  
Apprised by grapevine tremors of your advent,  
Subalterns in the garrison of comfort,  
Bellhops and elevator runners, all  
Standing at swift devotion. And the eighth floor!  
The skittering panic where, in half an hour,  
Each massive mirror in the lavish suite  
Must, like so many Hamlets, undergo  
A customary suit of solemn black;  
Each clock be strangled; and Heaven help that waiter  
Who lagged an instant with the rapid pitchers  
Of ice water or did not begin at once  
To tune up the brisk dinner knives! And Heaven  
Have mercy on the floor maid who forgot  
The gentle linen and the generous pillows  
Bulging like fatted geese! Rumour has caught  
Your Highness, neither splendid nor serene,  
Dressed in some fine dark cloth as dense with fuzz  
As any chick, doggedly packing feathers  
From pillow to pillow at two o'clock in the morning!

And rumour was your slave no less than those—  
Headwaiters, switch-board girls and editors,  
(Whom you would summon and permit to print  
According to your pleasure) chefs, reviewers,

Publishers, columnists, and book collectors,  
Chaussers, musicians, actresses and critics,  
Rivals of whose renown your candour stood  
In cordial jealousy and admiration.  
So you engrossed in one way or another  
Not only your immediate myrmidons,  
But all who touched upon your personal world  
Which, like your poems, was a dear deception,  
A strange adventure, curiously fixed  
By the stubborn facts of flesh and poetry,  
Maintained with gold, imperial paradox  
Of asiatic appetites in Brookline,  
The Mogul lost in a New England garden,  
The Queen of Cappadocia pattering down  
In a blue tobacco fog into the cellar  
To tinker with the furnace (called "Matilda")  
Or piling on her ample hearth the logs  
Sliced to her hand to serve her solitude  
In the long vigilant night. . . .

We were at dinner,

Some hundred lines ago, and I was chatting  
With Ada Russell, soul of polished silver,  
When from the head of the superb stairs rang  
That rich salute like bugles, and we rose  
And turned and looked up where like a green wave  
You shimmered darkly down and took your place,  
Glittering with delight, your blue eyes dancing  
In pulses of excitement, full of brave

Broad humour, something of Sam Johnson streaked  
With glints of steel and gleam of battle-axes,  
Your palate as fantastic and robust  
In food as that Leviathan's, your fervour  
In conversation quite as prodigal, Lady—  
Fox and tiger—whetted to devour  
Behemoth—or the terrified little poets  
Gaping and gasping at your table, while  
You talk like your own poems, splintering  
Colours hard and clean as onyx, spinning  
Phrases in prismatic whorls that flicker  
Jewels of fire at all facets, blazing  
Through books and obscure regions of the brain  
And dusty archives till they burst in flame  
Kindled by that quick wonder about Men  
And Women and Ghosts and that electric joy  
In locking mind with mind and coming to grips  
With controversial metal and that passion  
For eminence and the pure thunder of thought  
And the word coiled up like lightning and the love  
Of audience to defeat the taste of ashes,  
Gray roses, brittle vials of vinegar.

For in your cosmos, perfect, unprecious,  
Your loneliness could somehow celebrate  
That hectic victory which the actual terms  
Of life refused. This was your Genesis:  
Here you might brood over a dim desire  
And watch the word fulfilling it begin

To stir and spread and palpitate like some  
Slow glow-worm staining the darkness in your garden  
A smoky emerald. Yes, you could hold it  
Luminous, alive, cup it in the hollow  
Of your quick hand. This was your universe—  
The palpable projection of your will;  
Resounding with your fiats; filled with you;  
Perfumed with your cigars and spiced with perils  
Spun like some painted fictions to confront  
And spend your vigour upon in fantasy.  
Therefore, at *Sevenels*, no act or phrase  
Dared cast a casual shadow. All was keyed  
To your vitality, pitched up to accord  
With the shrill trumpets of your mind and thus  
Italicized and underlined and made  
Significant like exclamation points  
To cue the daily drama with as many  
Climaxes as possible.

Ah, you actress!

Imperious and pitiful and proud  
And such a child in your affections, such  
An ogre too in vast magnanimous gestures  
That could include your friends, your enemies,  
The black cat, Mr. Winky, and John Keats—  
This “Mister John Keats five feet high” for whom  
You drained your veins out in a dark libation,  
Pouring the literal sacrifice of blood  
To him so strictly cherished. Since, it seems,

By the abyss and heavy fraud of time,  
You could not warm his hands at *Sevenels*,  
(Those hands that had the damp of death upon them)  
Surround his sickness and his loneliness  
With ministrations of your love, or summon  
Physicians of the finest, the most loyal  
Of nurses, jealously usurp their places  
In the black watches at his bed, or bring  
Fanny and him together, or at last  
Erase the agony of those “posthumous” months  
In Rome by merciful opiates, all else  
Failing, all succour futile. So you cut  
Your heart out for his sake, so stretched the nights  
Of dedicated solitude until  
This poet, more than any unfulfilled  
As poet and as lover, found in you  
And in your equal unfulfillment his  
Compassionate victory and vindication—  
In your womb locked so bitterly and long  
Endymion was restored, restated, stilled  
As you in him found your most mortal purpose  
Fully defined, identified as woman  
And poet. For the same implacable reason  
Fixed in the cheated heart, devouring flesh,  
Rejecting him beneath some violets,  
Denying you with lilacs—that same reason  
Confirmed your labour, ratified your faith,  
And consecrated on your forehead fillets  
Of withering fire, the caustic flowers of death.

I cannot think of you and death together—  
The terms are not synonymous. Four years  
Of stubborn absence from felicity  
Are four years, more or less, of marking time  
By clocks and calendars and little cults  
Incubated into the world to cheep  
On Easter Sundays. Many a false Jesus  
Buzzes abroad in the land, relieving ladies  
Of inhibitions in Miami, calling  
Upon the name of poetry in parlours—  
The swamis and the yogis and the what-nots  
Issuing papal nuncios for lyrists  
Whose husbands trespass heavily in Delphi,  
Stumbling like bewildered ghosts through rooms  
Devoted to the asphodel, and searching  
For a lone mutilated sandwich left  
Miraculously from the locust swarm,  
Or straining somewhere in the fringe for one  
Familiar accent—only to wander feebly  
(Consoled somewhat by Jenkins and the siphon)  
Up into bed without Eurydice.

I cannot think of you and death together—  
The most unposthumous person that ever lived  
Is hardly cancelled by an epitaph;  
And though we smear bitumen on your mouth  
The brilliant wizardry still glitters there  
Of words that burned like golden standards captured  
From chaos, dark with blood, but with the sun

Laughing upon them. You were such a force  
That not since Whitman boomed our Jerichos  
Into oblivion, had moved among us.  
What should I tell you now? The state of song  
In Denmark—or New York? Deaths? Dissolutions?  
Alarums, menaces and maledictions?  
The satraps and the scandals and the schisms  
That split our amities? Who's in? Who's out?  
Who wins the Pulitzer this year? Shall I  
Dish up for your delight the miserable  
Pickings of the backstairs? Faugh! The rose  
In the fine nostrils of our boudoir beagles  
Will sooner reek of that which sniffed at it  
Than savour of itself. Well, we have poets,  
A few, who walk through lonely twilights telling  
Hard truths in parables to a small clan.  
And every new apartment on Parnassus  
Is leased or sub-leased to the multitude  
Still harping upon hollyhocks; or else  
Ransacking sex and feeling little glows  
Of naughty wisdom glide along their spines;  
Or we have singers who insinuate  
Slenderly at fifty cents a line  
Their delicate raptures over little things  
That hurt them, being beautiful. But where  
Is that one lion which this den of Daniels  
Might yap at? Where are all our poet-priests  
Who should go up before the jealous gods  
And read the entrails and make augury

For all the people? How shall we endure  
Egypt? Who shall strike the sterile rock  
Of our confusion and our weariness  
To quench us? They who once warned emperors  
And shook the world with dreams and prophecies—  
What have they for our bedlam? What full word  
For our bewilderment to eat? “The hungry sheep  
Look up and are not fed.” Our prose-men pander  
To quick-lunch appetites or precious whims;  
Our pulpits ruminate an ancient cud—  
There is no milk in them. And the old business  
Of making god goes profitably on  
In one way or another, and every way  
As like, at bottom, as one goose is like  
Another cackling home to Camelot  
Or Bethlehem or Mecca or Chicago.  
We charge our baseness to some starry fault,  
As though the Dragon’s Tail and Ursa Major  
In stealthy heat conniving with our blood  
Had set the constellations like a trap,  
And by a planetary trick contrived  
To horn us all. Tsst! We are Adam’s whelp,  
Though all the chastity of heaven twinkle  
Over our oats and origins forever.

I cannot think of you and death together.  
Your courage and your gaiety and that  
Intensity in all things—and your talk—  
We shall not hear such talk again; at least

Not here, not now. We have no time for talk.  
But even now and even here your voice,  
O voluble ghost, rings like a hundred bells,  
No two alike, the music of your mind  
To which flame back the high lights of the chairs,  
Illustrious tables and impanelled walls  
Vigilant with the bravery of books,  
A delicate Constable, a colour print,  
White orchids stemmed in silver bowls—white fire,  
Hearts of white fire frozen—sulphur roses  
In jars of jade the green of curdled milk,  
In black-wood pitchers like black swans with long  
Black throats—red fire reflecting tones and tropes,  
White silver mirroring agitated torches—  
Surface echoing surface, rainbows of speech,  
Fountains and flashing particles and patterns  
And cadences; the sound of many voices  
In one voice tossed against the tropic colour  
Of Ada Russell, there sustained, there fixed.

I cannot think of you and death together:  
I see you, exquisite and virile, fingering  
Orchids and Havanas with authentic grace;  
I hear you tenderly discuss Rachel—  
Rachel, who wore beneath the silk and swank  
Of Phèdre, Hermione or Mary Stuart,  
The rags of the street gamin; yes, Rachel,  
The skinny little Jewess singing songs  
In cheap cafés for winesops; yes, Rachel

With dark and sullen Jewish energy  
Burning and pounding in her blood and blazing  
Out of her fingertips, out of her eyes,  
Out of her mouth to such a music, it  
Shook the romantics at the *Comédie*  
In dust and powder down under a Voice!  
I hear you talk of Duse—and the room  
Becomes an altar smoking with sweet wine  
And roses red as blood, the marble stained  
The strange dark colour of old tears and blood.

We go out on the terrace and we step  
On fallen stars of bougainvillea;  
And in the sunken garden fireflies;  
And in the porphyry pool the gold-fishes;  
And the rich talk glittering in and out.  
(In what melodious garden, striped with bees  
And golden pleats of light, more resonant  
Than stradivarius or cremona, filled  
With the hot savage honey of sound, Milady,  
Lover of gardens, do you now renew  
The necessary and sonorous business  
Of grackles and the Baltimore orioles,  
The drowsy thunder in the rhododendron  
And the syringa, dark industrial bass  
Of bees, the pointed silver noise of water  
Dripping piccolo notes on white stone somewhere?)

Midnight. Adieus are done. The woman steps  
Along the somnolent stairs. . . . And in your library

(The fire and the silence and the curtains  
Dismissing one reality for another  
Less vulnerable, more capable of wounding),  
In solitary self-confinement shedding,  
Like Christabel, the armour of your world,  
The brilliant bandages of being Lowell,  
Slowly, with travail and convulsive frenzy,  
The woman abdicates, dissolves; the poet  
Emerges. . . . So the poem, too, comes aching  
In minute ecstasies that rend you, leaving  
Some drops of blood on ordinary paper,  
A sound of swans that pierces, dying proudly,  
A massive melancholy peace, a heart  
Bled white but still unpacified, a woman  
Suddenly lonely, suddenly afraid,  
Stripped of her tinsel, standing in the darkness,  
The theatre emptied, and the tawdry odour  
Of paint still pungent in her nostrils, burning  
Her eyes. . . . “Where are you, Ada Russell? And you,  
My friends, where are you? I am all alone!  
And I am frightened! See, I have a poem!  
I have a poem to show you!” . . .

*Dear.*

*It is evening.*

*The hour of departure—the hour of memories, of prayers.*

*One must hide everything and go to work.*

*From a letter*





### LETTER TO *Eleonora Duse*

I saw you once, La Duse, long ago,  
Or so it seemed,  
Or so  
It came upon me and I dreamed—I dreamed;  
Nevertheless I know  
That in that hour  
You were like sunset and a single tower  
Trembling in dead light: I remember how  
Your silver hair against your serious brow  
Made of your eyes impulsive lamps that shed  
Blackness like lustre over the heart dead  
And over every word you said.  
The flame in those deep sockets was the fire  
Of shadow cast up from some fled  
And unforgotten festival where flame—  
Mixed with dread  
And sharp desire  
And music and confused with stars and taken  
Like a tall city by night—stood alone and shaken  
With shame,  
Remembering betrayal and a name.

The play was *Ghosts*, of course,  
And you were Mrs. Alving, siccant, thin,  
Tortured with memories; your voice a pin  
Scratching upon the brain  
With whispered force  
That half-hysterical refrain  
“Spettri! Spettri!” the Ghosts come back again!  
Ah, Duse, always the ghosts return!  
You cannot kill them though you burn  
Their souls out in a mortuary urn.  
No matter who you were, no matter who—  
A woman of Ibsen, Sudermann, Sardou,  
Dumas, d'Annunzio—  
That woman reading Vladimir's letter or waiting  
With Santuzza—and hating, hating—  
That woman with her nerves, her nausea, her flow  
Of passion and languor and loneliness was—you!

You poured your heart  
Into *La Citta Morta*, *Fedra*, *Paolo*—  
Making them glow;  
And with your art  
Redeemed the phrases of a cold  
Voluptuary into vehement gold,  
Translating by a breath  
The sensual ardours and the smell of death;  
And with the motion of your hand,  
More beautiful than light,  
More bright,

Stirred like an angel's wand  
The thunder pools of his melodious skill  
Until  
All that was dense and tropical in him became  
Only the flame  
Of your eyes and your voice . . . and you, so small,  
So tired, so sick of it all,  
Towered into something terribly tall,  
A thousand statues in your step, your face  
A river of stars, a holy place—  
And the theatre shook  
With your body's brilliance like a look!  
You would go on the stage  
With that strange long stride,  
Walking as though there were mountains at your side;  
Clothed only in the glamour  
Of your intensity,  
With no claptrap, no clamour,  
No make-up, no mummery;  
Standing there  
With your gray hair—  
The mother, the mistress, the wife—  
Confessing life  
As it is—sordid, insupportable, sublime;  
Admitting time  
Uncorseted,  
With heavy breasts sucking the grief  
Of the world, heavier than lead  
With late bitter brief

Milk, with heart as dead  
But deep as the sea  
To drink, to drown all tragedy,  
Smiling like death a little wistfully.

So liquid and so level you were  
In your truth that the theatre  
Burned through your soul as might an hour  
Of twilight make a torch of some dark flower;  
Found in your luminous face a cup  
To fill with bitter beauty up;  
And in your eyes  
Tears of fire held under and straining to rise;  
And in your words  
Terror and tenderness like sea birds  
Trapped in something foreign and exact—  
Breaking their wings against the Fact.

So you would give  
As in a mirror, compassionate and purgative,  
The illusion of some loftier shape  
Than this, the shadow of escape,  
A new dimension, a new stream  
Of strength, a dream that we could dream,  
So clear, so close, so confident, so free  
That through its own perfection we  
Could come back, proud, exalted for a space,  
As though there were music on our face,  
To bear again the assault on body and heart and mind  
Of the reality we left behind.

Thus implicated, but not involved,  
Your art revealed but never solved,  
Never concluded; you sat apart  
Regarding the carnival, but in your heart  
Aloof, wearing no bells; you contemplated  
The hectic laughter and created  
Against the chaos of the world  
A solitude where you might keep  
Without stain,  
Unfurled,  
And inaccessibly steep—  
Whatever might or might not be—  
Your privilege of pain,  
The flag of your soul's essential and serene integrity.

Death said, "So,  
La Duse, it is time to go:  
The stage is dimmed for the final tableau"—  
Not amid the grapes and olives, the gold and silver of your  
Asolo—  
Not there, although . . .  
Not there, but in a city of harsh smoke-blackened snow. . . .  
The rest we know:  
That night in Pittsburgh—the blizzard—shut out  
From the stage door by some ghastly doubt—  
Shivering in the dingy yard. . . .  
That night in the play—breathing hard—  
(Who was the Porter with his foot in the door?  
With his back against it?—as so often before—

As this last time for you—and then no more). . . .  
The miserable hotel  
After the play, after the applause, after  
The curtain fell,  
After the sobs, the laughter,  
After the bell . . .  
Fever. Your white small face flushed. Your eyes  
Hot coals. The frightened company. Their cries.  
Your silence. The Doctors looking wise.  
But in their hearts (which cover  
The frigid certainty) knowing this play is over.  
Already the thin music in your ears  
Of a ghostly audience's ghostly tears  
And pale approval rustling in flat palms.  
The silver alms  
Of the Shears  
Clicking through the damp discoloured cloud  
Of your hair . . . beyond the rude  
Clatter of living, beyond the mortal feud  
Of the flesh and the proud  
Spirit unbowed,  
Though broken . . . feeling the shroud  
Cool against you, and the roses pressed  
(Still wet upon their hot-house stems)  
In crisp efficient diadems,  
Upon the streaked soft hair like artificial gems . . .  
Feeling the tight  
Earth at your breast (the sick sad world's breast)  
Like teeth that drain their nurse deliciously to rest. . . .

The tower

Flames in blinding darkness—you point a hand—(that hand!)—it flames

Like a flower

Of light . . .

Your mouth is immortal with names . . .

The tower flashes—

Crumples. You whisper—(that whisper!)—“Look!

Shelley’s ashes!

He is walking

The waves . . . La Porta Chiusa—Sola!” . . .

You stop talking. . . .



*You haven't got an Aunt Emily. Your aunts are just common auntie aunts.  
Aunt Sue's progeny to less fortunate contemporaries*





### LETTER TO *Emily Dickinson*

THEY speak of you as a recluse  
In dull commiserative sighs:  
As though denial were a ruse,  
As though your bravery were lies,  
As though it smelled of something pale  
And sacrificial to prevail  
Against the flesh, against the heart;  
As though your wry and radiant art  
Were like the shed of silver mail  
That sits upon the frightened snail;  
As though a "No" instead of "Yes"  
Had labeled you an anchoress;  
As though the nail, the blood, the tear,  
The terrible whisper, the red spear,  
The lantern and the fatal kiss  
Were somehow love's antithesis!

They could not hear your little moan,  
Your fingers tugging at the stone;  
They could not know you tall and risen  
Nor understand how tight a prison

The world can build with liberty:  
And how miraculously free  
Courage with both feet fast in hell  
Can be; they see, but not so well:  
They never see the light that spills  
Like stars among your daffodils;  
Nor in your orchard ever guess  
The shy feet of your loneliness.

Balboa of your fate, you stared  
On a Pacific none had dared:  
The salt remorseless wrench and roll  
Of the unplumbed and single soul.  
But you, supplied by bird and bee  
With telegrams of eternity,  
With bulletins that were stripped to serve  
The spirit's naked bone and nerve;  
You in your garden in the sun,  
Or in the day when there was none,  
You were aware, oh so aware  
Of something fiercer than despair:  
The terrible consuming beauty  
Of what a dead age once called duty:  
Of what our age of public paint  
And public love and unrestraint  
In all things else considers now  
As out of date as any vow:  
As hopelessly old-fashioned as  
The lovely thing your silence was.

But we, what do we know beyond  
The moment's spurious diamond:  
The clever phrase, the fulsome stress  
Upon each other's cleverness—  
Until a maudlin stupor steals  
Into our muddled heads and heels,  
And on the sickened brain beats only  
The frantic whimper, "Lonely! Lonely!"  
For never were we lonelier  
Than now: Oh never, never were  
Men and women so afraid  
Of being alone, or so dismayed  
At prospect of an hour that delves  
Into their dark bewildered selves,  
Recoiling from the hell that darts  
In fiery hungers from their hearts.  
The soiled, the sullen little boys  
And little girls who drown with noise  
The questions tapping canes on stone,  
The blind implacable monotone:  
Alone, alone, alone, alone.

And yet we sigh, "How much she missed—  
The lovelorn sentimentalist!"  
You who were filled: who broke the bread  
Of dew and stardust and were fed;  
Who broke the silver fish and ate  
The banquet of the Potentate;  
Who shut the door on world's delight

That turns to vinegar ere night;  
Who shut the door and shook apart  
The doors of Heaven with your heart;  
Who in your Amherst garden found  
The Passion and the bloody swound,  
The red sweat dropping on the ground.

Emily with your eyes the colour  
Of sherry; with your jasmin pallor;  
The velvet cap upon that hair  
Whose warm bronze caught a golden glare  
When sunlight jewelled it; whose breath  
Parted the red lips, the fine teeth  
Tiny as a squirrel's; whose  
Upper long lip could refuse  
What the full underlip desired;  
Whose spirit trembled and transpired  
Through your sweet flesh like liquid light  
That flashes on a summer night;  
Whose ardent hand was like the flower  
That shut its wings there for an hour;  
Whose whisper was a moth, whose word  
Shivered and piped like the small bird  
Hidden in alders near some lake  
When twilight and the heart both break.

Ah Emily, when you said "No,"  
When you said "Never," when you said "Go,"  
Did he hear what you said unsaid,  
As, at the gate turning his head,

He saw your little head turned too,  
And wept and went and suddenly knew  
The Soul's superior instants (your  
Phrase) those, only those endure?  
The parted Guest, the unsipped wine.  
The Meat untouched, the Palestine  
Anticipated in the sense  
Of some perpetual Imminence;  
The shadow of His Palm upon  
The brow of His Centurion.  
Therefore in that terrific niche  
Wherein you found yourself so rich,  
So definite, so undefined;  
In that enormous inch of Mind  
As infinite as in the sea's  
Pink shell thunder profundities,  
Or in the acorn smoulders Oak,  
Or Rome's blaze in a puff of smoke,  
Or rainbows burn in the cocoon,  
Or from her dead disk the new moon  
Stretches a first faint velvet horn  
And April's antlered night is born—  
Therefore, clasping the Fact that is,  
You found your glittering emphasis;  
And then and vividly thereafter  
The tinted bubble of your laughter  
Lifted and sang from room to room  
Of your triumphant daily tomb;  
Under your domestic snood

The drama of the neighborhood  
Gathered and groped and was resolved  
To breathless notes whose wisdom halved  
Bereavement or whose beauty doubled  
The pleasures of the few untroubled.  
With ungrammatical defiant  
Ecstasies that tripped some giant  
Neatly in a puckered phrase;  
With programmes of the commonplace  
In bird or flower keyed to such  
Excitement by your dancing touch;  
With your aerial gossip heard  
At dawn, at dusk, from bee, from bird;  
With private dialogues in plush  
Reported by a rapid thrush;  
With snowdrop symptoms on your lawn  
The golden doctor of the dawn  
Identifies as March's most  
Premature and candid ghost;  
With orioles, if you inquire,  
Putting your cherry tree on fire;  
With mole and mouse and twinkling ant  
Imperial and nonchalant.  
You knew the street and the blurred number  
Of blossoms faint with recent slumber;  
Arbutus on a rock, the wet  
Unwarranted first violet  
As yellow as a Louis-d'or,  
The columbine like Kohinoor,

The adder's tongue, the trillium,  
April's flag and April's drum  
And April's flute more delicate  
Than footfalls in the waxed estate  
Whose polished corridors declare  
Like bells the heart that tiptoes there.

To think of getting a poem tucked  
With flowers, itself a flower plucked  
Out of dark anguish, out of hope  
To vindicate an envelope,  
With red carnation for a stamp  
As though the letter had a lamp!  
Dear gentle daily household nun  
Announcing sunset and the sun;  
Self-shorn, self-kerchiefed, self-restored  
Unto the enigmatic Lord;  
Flying from a sulphurous God  
To the Pearl Presence in the pod;  
Striking from a rock that Moses  
Never knew, the blood of roses;  
Scaling Sinais with a noun  
And in some black verb plunging down.  
But always without compromise,  
Always with accurate brown eyes  
That would not veil the too uncouth  
Or blur the vision of the truth:  
As, when a girl, beneath the shade  
The clustering syringa made,

Between the flutter and the shout  
Of play you puzzled problems out;  
Or in the dim delicious barn,  
With sunlight like a spool of yarn  
That snarled in interrupted gold,  
Searching for freckled eggs to hold,  
Your heart skipped like a mouse in danger  
To see the sun enact the Manger,  
Establish Bethlehem, decree  
The Adoration of the Three,  
Convert the straw to gold, the oat  
To rubies, summon ass and goat,  
And turn the powdered local air  
To frankincense and fervent myrrh!

So always what you saw became  
Translated from the wick to flame:  
Through the dark crystal of your eye,  
Curved by the soul's intensity,  
Life and Love and Death would pass  
In points of fire under glass:  
The common agonies of life  
Twisting like a casual knife  
Into the heart, behind the brain;  
The quick unstudied cloud of pain;  
The massive hush, the marble breath,  
The curt omnipotence of death—  
All these dilated to a dot,  
Magnified to a fiery knot

Beneath the frugal frosty lens  
Of your dispassionate double sense.

But always, but above all, that  
Intolerable magnificat:  
The awful unknown sacrament  
Of love, the luminous event  
Whiter than death, the cheated lip,  
The thwarted womb, the steady drip  
Of blood and tears from bitter wicks  
Upon the mutual crucifix.

How different from our dreary fashion  
Of playing little games with passion,  
The flippant and ironic mode  
Of using love as episode,  
Of chinning to the fourteenth line  
To make a trivial valentine.

Ah well, when spurts another spring  
Of grass and when your linnets sing,  
Or when upon the eastern slopes  
Your lilies and your heliotropes  
Lure you to elude your Warden  
And wander wistfully your garden  
Like Enna's lonely child, like her  
Slipping your jealous Kidnapper  
To greet your robins back again,  
Your larkspur and your cyclamen,  
Sweet-william, pansy, pink and stock,  
Your butterflies on every rock

Fugitively anchored to  
A wharf of gold . . . O brief and blue  
And bittersweet the summer goes,  
Even your loyal pines, your crows,  
With the immemorial rose.  
And your autumnal hornet staggers  
Drunk with drenched pears; golden daggers  
Of corn stand stacked; the muffled sheep  
In sun-dust, pink and silver, sleep.  
And then the Cattle Show that starts  
With fakirs' tents and peddlers' carts  
That hurt so strangely. Then the snow  
That follows on the Cattle Show,  
Shutting you in, until there gleams  
Your blue peninsula of dreams. . . .  
And then the liquid spring once more  
Rapping diamonds at your door—  
And you so white, so small beside  
The early blossoms like a bride:  
The flowers lighted at your bed;  
Your eyes, your mouth so quieted;  
The brave thin hands like glass that wrote  
Poems coloured like Joseph's Coat. . . .  
No more, Emily: set the match  
To me with your precise dispatch,  
And smile my words out and redress  
By your remote abstemiousness  
The too inquisitive step, the bell  
That blunders in your citadel.

*She had seen that the finger of Death  
was upon her bosom—that, like the  
ephemerion, she had been made perfect in  
loveliness only to die. . . .*

— POE  
*Eleonora*





### LETTER TO *Virginia Clemm*

“**A**h, broken is the golden bowl!”—  
Virginia Clemm! Virginia Clemm!  
The rust is on the aureole;  
The dust is on the diadem:  
My heart is gray with them.  
Shut is the door, Lenore, Lenore!  
How shall his livid lips resume  
The ritual of “Nevermore,”  
The reverie of “Ulalume,”  
The music of his doom?

O little cousin fugitive  
As snow, as snowdrops, lovelier  
Than one star in a silver sieve  
Of lake water, more wan you were  
Than Death’s own chorister—  
And whiter still against that dark  
Decisive hair whose heavy blacks  
And purples curved a startling arc

Over the oval's delicate wax  
Where the lines of the throat relax.

Pale child-wife, what could you aver  
Of him you loved, this man with eyes  
Like fire, this whimsical Lucifer,  
Wings dipped in blood, mouth sick and wise  
With desperate Paradise?  
What could you know of Poe, this Poe  
Whose heart was its own bitter hell  
Feeding, consuming him, whose brow  
Was the fixed seat of ghosts that dwell  
Always with Israfel?

You loved him—that was all you knew—  
His ghastly moods, his tenderness,  
Always his gray eyes brushing you  
Like some remote mad passionless  
Imperative caress;  
Always the black terrific plume  
Of his despair whose motion was  
Dense with a desolate perfume  
That stained the Many-Coloured Grass  
And could not ever pass.

Perhaps you knew him best of all,  
Loving him best, the whole of him,  
Listening with him to the fall  
Of the soft-footed seraphim

Or other guests more grim—  
And growing steadily strangely more  
Like one implacable image, till  
The footfalls on the tufted floor  
Tinkled and stopped—and Death stood still—  
And listened—as Death will.

And the eyes of the man whose dream was Death  
Fastened upon your eyes and shook  
Them open like flowers, and your breath  
Fluttered like wings beneath that look—  
And he shut them like a book:  
And the golden harp and the silver song  
Were silent both; the cat, the coat  
Were put away; and love more strong  
Than life trembled in your bird throat  
A last and lonely note.



## LETTER TO FANNY BRAWNE

. . . *Oh, Brown, I have coals of fire in my breast.*

*John Keats to Charles Brown, Naples,  
1 November, 1820*





### LETTER TO *Fanny Brawne*

DEAR FANNY, (How the name still glows!—  
That cough! That shadow on the sheets,  
Spotting them arterial rose,  
Splashing them with hot heart beats!)  
When Charles Brown in that fatal house  
Said, “Miss Brawne, this is Mr. Keats,”  
Little guessed your poet then  
His Golgotha—his Darien.

Your buoyant colour like a wave  
Of blood beneath your northern skin;  
The nostril’s accent; the blue cave  
The laughter of your eyes brimmed in;  
Your bright sharp breast that would not save  
The sick and exiled paladin;  
And all your hair’s heaped yellow wealth  
And the high music of your health—

All this proud and personal trash  
Received as the best present  
Delight of birth, delight of death—  
The anguished soul's intelligence;  
The conflict of the sword and shield . . .  
The brain rebels, the heart prostrates;  
The bell is on the magic drum—  
And he is murmuring, "Fancy Browne!"

And so the golden head, the green  
Wind-shadowed eyes are yours now dear;  
They look so splendid on a plate—  
And you can make your pretty eyes  
The pale-mouthed prophet loves his face,  
The peer is your cavalier—  
Thought from a pot of basil bloom  
Red leaves that mark an early doom.

And if he coughs, it is the rain;  
And if he sings, it is your grace;  
And if his teeth bite back the pain,  
A towel or a shred of lace  
Can quite remove the brilliant stain . . .  
O picidess imperial face,  
The tumult flushing to his cheek,  
The dabbled feathers in the desk.

Milady, have we done you wrong?  
Your pardon, then, for trifles trifles;  
But he possessed you in his song—  
You were his silence and his painter;

He goes to sleep, and does not wake  
To meet the shadows of the past—  
The past is dead, and lies to him,  
But the sex passions that send him.

Is this not magnified the fault  
Is this very weakness of the senses,  
And you are still occasional sake  
Or the quickness of his defences?  
His name from the Roman vault  
Is still the same, and still the same—  
Bring with him the mill beat  
The heart beats on the winding sheet.

Lesson us young and tear to read,  
"He has made me put to try—they tear him  
so pieces—", lessons that make him bleed  
Liberally is such as—we will spare him.

Your white sarcophagus is his head  
And at the pottery to declare him  
Your master and your messenger.  
"O! never, do you speak of her!"

There is a grave. Do let it be.  
A quiet grave. "O! I can feel  
The flowers growing over me—  
(For the quiet—") Should you steal  
Upon it, ever so quietly  
The heart of heart would know that heel! . . .  
He loved you, Fanny Brawne—too well—  
Perhaps . . . You were his Heaven—his Hell.



*I shall be ever maiden. . . .*

*A fragment*





### LETTER TO *Sappho*

It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening  
The bats weave soft black circles and their wings  
Splash delicate ink upon the pale blue air.  
It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening  
Before the thunder you can smell the rain  
Like powder, you can hear the moths and chafers  
Thudding at screens and windows, whispering  
Along the walls, lashing against the lamps.  
It is the evening, Sappho. In the evening  
The silver business of the spider fills  
The fields: for in that heavy interim,  
When lightning blooms upon a livid stem,  
The spider, drawing beauty from his bowels,  
Dresses the earth in nets of pearl and cloth  
Of silver. . . . Strange, how many yards of silk  
The spider wastes to catch one fly. And yet  
How worth the cost. There is a wisdom, Sappho,

Which the world counts as folly: it consists  
In wasting yards of silk to catch one fly.  
And you, being a woman and a poet,  
Must know the rich sagacity of waste,  
Remembering that the poet who has salt  
And passion in his blood has done it always,  
Is doing it now, forever and forever,  
As you did constantly, but to defeat  
Somehow the industry of Death—to blunt  
The frantic scissors, to maintain one thread  
Against that narrow accuracy. For Death,  
O Sappho, Death has hardly changed. She is  
The same, tiptoeing about on slippered feet,  
Clicking her teeth and sighing. . . . And the spider. . . .

To-morrow morning, after the rain, the grass  
Will glitter when the sun stands on the hills  
Stretching his arms (the same sun, lovely Sappho,  
The very same as once in Lesbos). How  
The grass will twinkle everywhere with webs!  
Abandoned palaces! Tents of the Arabs  
Blowing an empty splendour in the sun!  
A city of stealthy silk and silver builded  
So silently, so swiftly overnight  
Between two flashes and a thunder clap—  
Blue minarets and emerald pavilions—  
And all for a few beaded flies, a few  
Insects with freckled wings! . . .

Incredible

To think there will be a to-morrow morning,  
And you will not be there. The caterpillar  
Will walk in waves, but you will not be there.  
Not you, though pigeons patter on the roof  
With rainbows round their throats, and all the cocks  
Brandish their scarlet plumes and blow alarums  
Over the valleys, you will be so quiet;  
Though ants like tiny black pearls tilt a leaf  
Loaded with dew across a strenuous inch  
Of earth, you will know nothing of these things.  
Only the water scooping diamonds  
Out of your eyes, O Lesbian; only the fishes  
Fretting your nipples that had winced to feel  
The exquisite teeth of Atthis, the red mouth  
Of Erinna, pale, of the golden lyre; only  
The cold Ionian nibbling at those fingers  
That once had foraged secret fire and touched  
The soul of music at the centre; only  
The white sea-snake drowsing in the dark bed  
That was your hair. . . .

No more the marble forehead

Flushed at the temples with blue veins like flowers  
Throbbing, ravaged with kisses, kissed no more  
But by the loose-lipped fishes, the dank garlands  
Of seaweed. . . . Lovely Sappho, laurelled with fire,  
Priestess of love and the smitten lute and the lute-strings,  
Sterile—save in the song’s womb, fierce and unfurrowed—

Save in the seedless blossom of song and the kisses  
Burning like fire unfertile, the kisses raining  
Like fire! . . .

Do you remember sprightly Gorgo  
Whose chatter was a weariness? Do you remember  
Megara and Anagora of Miletus?  
Gongyla of Colophon, Mnasidica  
Slim as a spear, soft-spoken? Do you remember  
Dica, the delicate-fingered, twisting fillets  
Of dill shoots and cold leaves? Have you forgotten  
The nameless daughter of Polyanax?  
Was it for Phaon that you left all this?—  
The passionate congress of your lutes for him,  
Whatever he was—boatman at Mytilene  
Or shepherd with his black curls and white throat  
And foolish whistle? Could you leave for him  
Andromeda's little foot curled like a cloud  
All silver over the croup of Pegasus?  
Leave the full moon that made a sleepless flame  
Of Lesbos and the temples glimmering  
Upon the polished beach under the night  
Inestimable and naked, under the acres  
Of the ripe stars and lucid Pleiades?  
Ah for Adonis! Ah, the vocal shell!  
Ah for the roses of Pieria!  
Ah for the proud capricious spur of Love!  
The blood-red heel! The blackened bag of arrows!  
The furious plume! Ah, Love with breasts of brass  
And milk of madness! The brazier of the Goddess

Glowing with coals! The bronze divinely tortured!  
The permanent lips that drink the perfect wine!

“Star-stationed incorruptible Aphrodite,  
Daughter of Zeus, wile-weaver, I beseech thee  
Break not my spirit with distress and anguish,

Lady of Passion!

Come to me now, if ever before in pity  
Thou gavest ear, listening to me lonely,  
Leaving thy father’s golden house and gliding

With the yoked chariot

Pulled by the swift white sparrows plunging so softly  
Over the dark earth: down the delightful heaven  
Through the mid-ether, arriving rapidly

Thou, O God’s daughter,

Smiling with mouth and with eyelids luminous,  
Thou didst ask what now is befallen me,  
Why I call now and what I now in my mad heart

Desire most dearly,

Saying, ‘What Beauty now wouldst draw to thee?  
Who wrongs thee, Sappho? For even she shall follow  
Who flees, and if she rejects gifts, shall yet give,

Shall soon love thee,

However loth, if she loves thee not now, Sappho.’  
Come, I pray thee, come now too, and release me  
From the bright bitter agony, save and befriend me,

Ah Aphrodite!”

So you cried out to the giver of wounds, the spinner  
Of fictions, sick with the acrid honey of love,

Knowing love dead, tasting the dust on the tongue—  
“I loved thee—Atthis, of old time, ah once—  
Atthis, long since—in old time overpast!”—  
All that night at the Cliff cried out with the water  
Washing the Cliff, “Ah, how shall I forget  
Thy little ways, thy laughter, Anactoria?  
Thine eyes more sapphire than the Lesbian sea,  
Thy nails upon the cithern and their marks  
Like quick faint painted moons upon my flesh,  
My breasts aching with them and all my limbs  
Trembling with sweat and the sweetness like a death!”

So in the spring night you remembered, Sappho.  
(Whom Solon memorized and Plutarch called  
“The heart of a volcano,” letting drop  
The drinking cup from his shamed fingers). So,  
Small and dark, you stood upon the Cliff,  
The brightness over the towers, and the sea  
Stroking seven-stringed voluptuous octaves  
Hollow and hoarse and violent. The night  
Shook with the music of a thousand bugles  
Mixed with the smell of streams and wet wind-flowers,  
Gardens of the rose and hyacinth,  
River-beds burning with the oleander  
And wild pomegranate, olive groves and fountains  
Where dreamed the cyclamen and violet  
With feathery maiden-hair; the fragrant grass  
Beneath your feet was silvered an inch thick  
With dew like frost; some black soaked branches dripped

Heavily jewelled darkness down like dew.  
You shivered, and the silver shadows crept  
Over your body like remembered fingers. . . .  
Now the sea walks with moonlight on her hands—  
And ah, the nightingale!

“O sing no more!

Sing on, and let me not remember more!  
Let me forget false love and false delight,  
Forget that I am old, that I am tired,  
No longer delicate and desirable!  
If thee Cyprus or Paphos or Panormos—  
But no, the golden hounds are leashed, the doves  
Are hooded. Even She has quite forgotten,  
In whose cold temple all my chaplets hang,  
And trophies spotted with my tears and blood.  
The song is done. The nightingale is finished.  
It is the end. I see a phantom plow  
And phantom horses cutting a quiet furrow  
Through ghostly distances. I see the sun—  
Stand face to face, friend . . . and unveil the grace  
That grows within thine eyes. . . . It is the end.  
Thy wisdom was my wisdom, Cytherea—  
It breaks me—and I give you back the shell. . . .”

The crested kingfisher, trapped in a turbulent *If*,  
Who sees the water and rejects the cliff,  
And splits the mirrored image of despair,  
Shattering the glassed and agitated hair—  
And leaving only a little shadow there.



*If you would sing of heroes, sing of her  
For she was young and dauntless, unafraid  
In Sodom's chaos; nothing could deter  
That backward look where beating brimstone played;  
Those loyal eyes cost her brief flesh and blood.  
Tell us no tale of shame or wickedness  
Only how faith and courage at the flood  
Became a white and shining loveliness.  
So let the gleaming pillar on the plain  
Rebuke safe cowards running from the past:  
They make no salt beneath a fiery rain,  
No savor of their little deeds will last.  
But when Lot's wife put on her crystal shroud  
The sky saluted and Prometheus bowed!*

—ELIZABETH MORROW

*Lot's Wife*





### LETTER TO *Lot's Wife*

**T**HAT wild look back! That curious lovely fault  
Frozen into elegiac salt!

That glittering epitaph! That dazzling death  
Wistful and impudent and out of breath!  
That lift of throat! That challenge of the chin!  
That gaze dilated, fierce and feminine,  
Drinking the sulphur, mouth and nostrils wide,  
Eyes flashing—the flash fixed as it defied!

What bliss were it to wander like a waif  
Remembering how lovely, how unsafe,  
How sweet, how marvelously sweet and sharp  
It was to live once and to hear the harp  
Drawn like a silver track of blood that lingers  
In the hot furrow of the long-nailed fingers  
Encased in shell of gold; to hear the singers

Black-curled, with oil of cassia and clove,  
And silks as savage as the lamps that move  
In a green darkness where the leopards rove  
And antelopes go humid-eyed with love  
And forests steam with incense and the grove  
Moans with monotonous lutes and even the dove  
With the warm bubbling of his throat whereof  
The sound is as a subtle garment wove  
All in one tint—so was it to live once  
When day and night the feverish orisons  
Of love went up in rich perpetual pain  
From the high altar fragrant with the stain  
Of milk-white goats, the beautiful, the slain.

Then too there were the strange delicious rites  
Ushered with shadowy prefaces and lights  
From branches painted with such fervent cunning  
Of chrysoprase and ochre, the girls running  
In shrill swift frenzied files, their stained hair streaming  
Like flame blown back, the gilded serpents gleaming  
In angry bracelets at their wrists and screaming,  
The daggers drunk with blood, the vine-topped wands  
Shaking like hair and music in their hands  
That no man looks upon and lives, no beast  
Encounters and escapes. And then the feast  
Of Syrian Adonis when the streets  
Of Sodom rang with stallions whose hoof-beats  
Filled the bright air with bells. The cavalcade  
Blew horns like lilies and the horses neighed,

Rattling the golden disks their manes displayed,  
And the red trumpets of the Priestess brayed,  
And through the summer solstice youth and maid  
And priest with black beard threaded scarlet swayed  
In slow processional frieze with silver basket  
And jewel-frosted jar until the casket  
Loomed huge and purple whereon, pale in death,  
The young god dreamed himself from stone to breath.

Such flutes and flowers! And my golden shawl!  
My hair just so, with Tyrian interval  
Terraced, and dripping nard and dropping gum  
Oozed odourously out of labdanum!  
Such crowding and such jostling at the doors  
Three-plated, the king's horses on all fours  
Rising up sheer and shining like black waves  
With silver crests! The soldiers! And the knaves  
Nudging and slitting purses! And the veils  
Of muslin torn! The oaths! The shrieks! The wails!  
The love-girls with their eyes like jewels blue  
Half-shut in silver lids, and skins like dew,  
And with embroideries wherein stags strive  
With jaguars and seem, bleeding, more alive  
In the spun conflict that our looms contrive  
Than ever on the actual hills! That hush!  
The song poured out like fire from a bush:

“O Queen that lovest Golgi and the hum  
Of the honied thighs that haunt Idalium

And Eryx, Aphrodite that with gold  
Playest, lo, from out Acheron's hell-hold  
They have brought back to thee Adonis—even  
In the twelfth month they have brought back your Heaven.  
They, the neat-ankled Hours, tardiest  
Of the Immortals; at our dear behest  
Always they come to us, the secret Hours  
With treasure in their hands and eyes like flowers.  
Therefore, for thy delight, O Thou of names  
Innumerable and temples, fruits like flames  
That tall trees burst with, lie before him, and  
The delicate gardens, cakes from Samarkand,  
Knitted in kneading trays, the white wheat meal  
And blossoms pounded with a golden wheel  
In olive oil, with paste of figs and grapes  
Of pearl, in flying and in creeping shapes  
Wrought. . . . Lo, here are set before him, here  
Green bowers heavy with tender anise, where  
The little Loves go fluttering here and there  
Like infant nightingales from bough to bough.  
O the gold, the ebony! (And sleepest thou?)  
O the twin eagles of white ivory  
That carry the cupbearer! O the cloak  
Of purple strewn more soft than sleep or smoke!  
So will Miletus say and whoso heeds  
The sheep in Samos. . . . All night the Cyprian feeds  
On the gold-bearded lips. . . . But cold with rain  
The dawn drifts as we take our god again  
Down to the beach, and with dishevelled hair

And raiment unrestrained and bosom bare  
Begin our song, the while Adonis dead  
Is by the waves broken once more for bread."

How should it profit you to walk hereafter,  
The sistrum clashing soft seductive laughter  
Like ear-rings at the warm cave of your ears,  
With sound of sackbuts and with dulcimers,  
Persuasive shawns, the delicate lewd noise  
From arrassed chambers of the painted boys,  
The ardent baths veined green with shapes that swim  
Inquisitively under liquid limb  
And liquid hair in vapour pearly dim?  
Could there be such a sweet death in the keees  
Again, such sick imperial sins as these?  
Such godlike weariness when for an hour  
We crush between our teeth the fiery flower?  
What! Would you drag a pillow or a shawl  
Out of the fallen house, the falling wall  
And think to cheat your frugal mountain home  
With jasper hairpin or a jewelled comb  
Rescued from chaos like some old wives' tale  
Mumbled at twilight when the functions fail  
And memory is bleak and passion stale—  
The sanguinary slow rehearsal pale  
With marks of old blood from Gomorrah's Grail?

Nay, but to follow him, the high, the holy  
Husband, hold his hand and go up slowly

Into the hills, f rsooth to Zoar, follow  
A fabulous Lord into a foreign hollow!  
Resume the barren worship that denies  
The hot immediate magic of the eyes!  
Nay, but to grow old in a strange land, grow  
Old amid strangers, knowing what you know,  
Toothless, with few white hairs and eyes burned out,  
A foolish hag that mutters, hobbling about  
Upon a stick and telling stories none  
Believes, or else, pretending, eggs you on  
Only to laugh into your dazed face, only  
To have you muttering still, bewildered, lonely,  
Searching in every smile a feeble hope  
Of credence! Nay, but to grow blind and grope  
In the tent's darkness from the sun's cruel night  
And hear an old familiar cough and fight  
A thousand times the impulse to creep slowly,  
Softly up on him, the high, the holy,  
And stop his cough and whining to his Lord  
With the quick wisdom of a twist of cord.

Therefore, the pulse bell-toned like birds that brood  
In the young summer of the branching blood,  
The three gold pendants of Queen Ashtoreth  
Ajar, the ankle-rings a-jingle, breath  
Drawn full, sustained, you turned your face to death,  
Wheeling as wheels the heron to her doom,  
Or as the swan rides on a rigid plume  
Mirrored in final music, or at gloom

Of green dusk quail will quit their mates to come  
After the fowler's pipe, or in her tomb  
Like one red rose the phoenix will resume  
Her fiery identity. . . .

To refuse

This moment were a winter of abuse  
And folly; but to grasp it and to use  
The Soul out in a swift Forever whose  
Instant cannot perish but renews  
Eternity with time. . . . I turn! I choose!  
Ah God! It is an easy thing to lose  
Thy favour, to put off my broidered shoes  
Lined with a scarlet wool and with the doe's  
Moon-spotted skin made beautiful, to close  
The golden bitter chapter with a rose  
Pressed down in tears of blood between the prose  
And the fierce poem this my madness knows.

That look! I have seen it somewhere! I have known  
That sidelong stare—half starriness, half stone!  
Not quite all stone as yet, the balls as yet  
Still bright, still quick, like moons before they set!  
But the heart heavy with the secret frost;  
The silver edict gripping the hair tossed  
Over the tawny shoulder twisted thus;  
The face flushed, terrified, tumultuous  
With flame whose violent shadows seem to scorch  
The blood—till in a breath the golden torch

Of that small face is turned to fiery sleet!  
That little mirror of Gomorrah's heat  
Precipitated into crystal so  
You cannot say if it be fire or snow!  
Even the lurid shadows quite congealed—  
In the swift act of flickering stopped and sealed!  
That look! That long reluctant lonely look!  
So like a child's that cannot leave her book  
All dark and admirable with monsters, deep  
In such delight, dragged off to prayer and sleep  
Sullenly. . . .

And you, aroused, superb,  
Asserting the proud pronoun, the proud verb;  
Confounding with the quiet phrase, "I am!"  
The grim and crimson God of Abraham;  
Flinging into that carnal beard the word  
Older, wiser, taller than the Lord,  
More royal and more radiant than He,  
More God, more valid in divinity.

The cautious disputant, the son-in-law  
Of Abraham who saw the thing he saw  
And all his years saw nothing, even Lot  
Succumbed to tacit death upon his cot,  
Groaning, inglorious, forgotten save  
As you are not beside him in his grave  
Of worms and mortal dissolution. Turn  
Always, O Woman, look you back and burn  
In frost, yourself your monument—and urn!

O dear and undecaying Lady, now  
As then, as always, you shall show men how  
Upon the desperate occasion rings  
A woman's scorn of man-invented Kings,  
The Gods proposed by frightened man to give  
A reason for his terror, to deceive  
Your courage to his cowardice, your trust  
To his soft moral-coated puny lust!



## POSTSCRIPT

What is a letter without some excuse,  
By way of postscript, for a *coup de grâce*?  
If well employed, it is a charming ruse,  
A diamond heel upon a hated face,  
King led from Queen and trumped by lowly Deuce,  
A woman's trick for taking time and space—  
And yet, when all is said, what is a letter  
That lacks this (how the French call) *raison d'être*?

How doth the little busy bee improve  
Each shining hour and head he lights upon:  
So doth a lady when she is in love  
Write postscripts that she wastes her nights upon;  
Stout burghers, whom the well-known symptoms move,  
Spoil more pens than a poet bites upon  
In giving vent to that same pleasant fury  
Which some day will delight a judge and jury.

I would not for the world stand Platitudes  
Upon its head and call it Paradox:  
It is a vulgar passion, quite as crude  
As that which prompts the Devil when he mocks  
His image in a lady neither lewd  
Nor yet unlovely with or without frocks. . . .  
So I believe in good old-fashioned sinning—  
Although our present crop of oats is thinning.

And yet there never was a time, I warrant,  
When people tried so desperately hard  
To be so bad: for virtue is abhorrent—  
(That is, the sort that is its own reward).  
Now sin and liquor make a messy torrent—  
Both bootleg. And still virtue is abhorred  
By flaming age and youth who never sleep,  
But do such things as make the angels weep—

If there are any angles left to do so,  
With angels and with weeping out of fashion—  
Along with reverence and Robinson Crusoe  
And quiet mind and more than moment's passion  
And simple faith and marriage sans a trousseau  
And no paternal wedding cheque to cash in. . . .  
But then this stuff, old thing, is well—Victorian;  
Hardly the vehicle to ride to glory in.

There are a thousand sins for every virtue;  
You choose the kind with which you are congenial:  
Too much of being very good may hurt you;  
Then leave the decent business to the menial:  
Sin—and be damned to cuttlefish that squirt you  
With ink that is a trifle extra-venial;  
But this above all: syndicate it first—  
Or you can sin and sin until you burst!

So be as bad as possible—at profit;  
Not like to these, such dear dead girls, who, even

In spite of splendid sins, must freeze in Tophet,  
Or, in despite of virtue, burn in Heaven,  
Unware that bread, no matter how you stuff it  
With raisins, will not rise without some leaven. . . .  
Though satyrs go to church and nymphs reform,  
Great sin is still the taking of Heaven by storm!

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